



International reporting in the age of participatory media

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Source: *Daedalus*, Spring 2010, Vol. 139, No. 2, On the future of news (Spring 2010), pp. 66-75

Published by: The MIT Press on behalf of American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20749825>

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In the wake of Iran's disputed 2009 presidential election, millions of protesters took to the streets of Tehran, some attempting to start a "green revolution" to oust President Ahmedinejad and other authority figures. The Iranian government attempted to quell the protests by arresting the instigators, and to render them invisible by tightly controlling media coverage of events. On June 16, a day after an estimated three million protesters marched on Azadi Street, Iran's Ministry of Culture issued a partial ban targeting international reporters. Reporters could remain within Iran, but were banned from leaving their offices or hotel rooms and were explicitly prohibited from covering the protests.

With strong audience interest in stories from Iran, news organizations faced a challenge: how do you report a story you have been banned from covering? Protesters in Iran and their supporters abroad quickly proffered one answer: cover Iran via citizen media. CNN relied heavily on its iReport site, which invites amateurs to submit videos of breaking news; the network aired 180 of the roughly 5,200 Iran-related videos they received.¹ Robert Mackey of

The New York Times focused the *Times* news blog, The Lede, on the protests, excerpting at length from Iran-focused blogs. *Newsweek* offered a "Twitter Timeline," with key events in the protests illustrated by 140-character posts ("tweets").

The embrace of citizen media in the Iran coverage by professional journalism organizations represents a small, but dramatic, shift in the structure of international news, a quiet revolution transforming how we understand events in other countries. But as the Tehran street protests were a result not just of a disputed election but of deeper factors, professional journalism's embrace of the amateur reflects a series of shifts beyond a press ban in Iran.

A wealth of analysis has focused on "the crisis in journalism," the sharp decline in revenues for many U.S. newspapers that correlates with layoffs of experienced journalists, and the closure of influential newspapers like Denver's *Rocky Mountain News*. There is no doubt that fiscal pressures on news organizations are affecting international news coverage. Only four U.S. newspapers maintain significant overseas bureaus, while the television network ABC has moved toward covering countries via

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single “digital reporters,” who are less costly than fully staffed bureaus. Alisa Miller, president of Public Radio International, argues that financial pressures are moving television networks away from international stories and toward celebrity journalism because “covering Britney [Spears] is cheaper.”

But fiscal pressures alone are insufficient to explain the embrace of citizen media in reporting on Iran, or related shifts in the structure of international reporting. Technological progress has steadily reduced the cost of overseas news production, a process that began with cost savings through the computerization of wire services in the 1980s and that has been accelerated through the near-global adoption of the Internet. The decrease in price and increase in quality of consumer video cameras, and the integration of cameras into mobile phones, have greatly expanded the set of people who can create audiovisual content, while the rise of publishing platforms like Blogger and YouTube makes it at least theoretically possible that amateur media authors could reach a global audience.

The green revolutionaries in Iran were well positioned to take advantage of these reduced production costs and new distribution channels. A crack-down on independent newspapers – a counter-reaction to the reformist presidency of Mohammed Khatami by hard-liners in the Iranian courts – led many independent journalists to look for digital means of distribution. When blogs reached Iran in 2001, they were quickly adopted by independent journalists and political activists. The Open Net Initiative estimates that there are 60,000 actively updated blogs in Iran. This suggests a large population of technically sophisticated users, as it is more difficult to maintain a blog in Iran than in

the United States. Iranian authorities block access to many online publishing platforms, and it requires significant efforts to circumvent these attempts at censorship. When protests broke out in the streets of Tehran, a large population of Iranians was experienced in using the Internet to communicate political information to a global audience.

The decreasing cost of consumer electronics made it possible, to an unprecedented degree, to arm human rights activists in Iran with cameras. Shahram Homaoun, the president of Channel One, a Los Angeles-based satellite television channel that broadcasts to Iran, sent more than ten thousand small video cameras to Iran prior to the 2009 election. He reports that his network has been flooded with thousands of images and videos delivered by email. Faced with a population knowledgeable about the Internet and armed with inexpensive cameras, Iranian authorities followed in the footsteps of Burma and Cambodia and briefly shut off access to the Internet, reconnecting the country at reduced levels of bandwidth, a strategy that may have been designed to discourage the emailing and posting of videos or to make filtering of online content more manageable for censors.

The persistence and creativity shown by Iranian activists in reporting the electoral protests is an illustration of a second trend influencing international news: the demand of people to influence how they are represented in media. Again, this is an old phenomenon whose pace has been accelerating through technological change. As Edward Said noted, part of the postcolonial struggle is the move to control mediated narratives of a people’s experiences.²

The borderlessness engendered by the Internet and satellite television means it is now possible for Chinese citizens to

monitor how their local issues are portrayed in European and American media. Frustrated by Western coverage of the March 2008 Lhasa riots, thousands of young Chinese began talking back to Western media, posting nationalist videos on YouTube asserting Tibet as an eternal part of the Chinese nation. Jin Rao, a twenty-three-year-old Internet entrepreneur, set up anti-cnn.com to examine and debunk media coverage of Chinese issues. Participants on the site identified a number of images of police beating protesters that ran in American and German newspapers with captions about China's crackdown; they demonstrated that the photos were taken in Nepal and that the officers in question were Nepali. Chinese students rallied in European and North American cities to protest perceived media bias.

In this context, the response of Iranian activists to the government's swift declaration of victory for Ahmedinejad was predictable. Increasingly accustomed to pushing back against media representations, activists fought their representation in government-controlled domestic media via international media. The skill activists displayed in promoting their message and the receptivity of international media to a narrative of popular uprising may have led to reporting that underrepresented popular support for the reelected government, as BBC Global News Director Richard Sambrook observed, reflecting on the challenges his and other networks faced in interpreting citizen media reports.³

Global Voices, the citizen media aggregator I helped found and run, attempted to balance coverage by translating blog posts from Ahmedinejad supporters as well as from protesters. The conservative bloggers, who wrote in Persian rather than English, wrote of their dismay at international media coverage of the elec-

tion, seeing amplification of the protesters' views as evidence that the United States and the United Kingdom were conspiring to overthrow the government.⁴ While the Internet has made it increasingly possible to influence international narratives, it has done little to bridge linguistic barriers. The limited influence conservative authors were able to exercise may have reflected Western media biases, or may simply have been a by-product of linguistic barriers.

If Western news networks had easy access to Farsi translators, it is possible that they would have covered conservative voices from Iran more closely. However, a third trend shaping international news coverage – the rise of the 24-hour news cycle – suggests that news outlets may not have been willing to wait for careful translations. When street protests erupted in Tehran on June 13, CNN was late to the game, running its first Web story about the elections late that night. Thousands of Twitter users criticized CNN for missing the story, pointing to breaking news coverage on other networks and CNN's history of on-the-scene reporting from the Middle East. Users began marking their posts with “#CNNfail,” a “hashtag” used to make related posts easier to find via search engines.⁵

In an earlier time, CNN's delay in covering news that broke on a Saturday might have been forgiven. But patterns of news consumption are shifting, led by 24-hour cable news and the Internet. An ethnography of U.S., Indian, and U.K. news consumption commissioned by the Associated Press in 2008 concluded that young adult readers engage in “constant checking,” a relentless process of reloading news pages, looking for developments and resolution to news stories.⁶ As news

outlets attempt to fill these needs, demand is increasing for news that is not just fast-breaking, but continually updated.

While older Internet users expect communication to be episodic, using email as a primary medium, younger Internet users expect continuous communication, using instant messaging tools.⁷ This constant communication became a form of community publishing with Facebook, where frequent “status updates” are communicated to a user’s friends. The trend reached new extremes with Twitter, which encourages users to post pithy updates many times a day. In the wake of the June 13 protests in Tehran, Twitter was filled with commentary on the events in Iran. Some users offered eyewitness reports from the ground, others analyzed and amplified information – and disinformation – they had heard on Twitter and elsewhere. At the peak of interest in the protests, tweets about Iran exceeded 15,000 per hour⁸ representing as much as 3 percent of the total traffic on the service.⁹

CNN, still stinging from criticism that it was missing the Iran story, followed the lead of other networks and began on-air reading of tweets from Iranians both in the country and the diaspora. News anchors found themselves offering awkward disclaimers before reading posts, saying, “We have no way of verifying any of these reports.” Brian Stelter of *The New York Times* noted that the embrace of citizen media signified a willingness to bend rules on verifiability and attribution that have generally been central to news reporting. Stelter observed that we are seeing an inversion of fact-checking models, leading newspapers to “publish first, ask questions later. If you still don’t know the answer, ask your readers.”¹⁰

These factors – the accelerated pace of the news cycle, the ability for ordinary Internet users to create and publish digital media, and the willingness of individuals to challenge media narratives – are combining with the breakdown of financial models that historically financed professional international media to produce seismic shifts in the structure of international news reporting. As Clay Shirky notes in his essay “Newspapers and Thinking the Unthinkable,” “That is what real revolutions are like. The old stuff gets broken faster than the new stuff is put in its place.”¹¹

At this moment of uncertainty and confusion, different groups are experimenting with a wealth of new models designed to produce international news, adapting to one or more of the changes outlined above. Some of the projects discussed below are less than a year old, and the older ones have often changed direction, focus, or method in recent years. It is possible that one of these models will emerge as the new *modus operandi* for international reporting. However, it is much more likely that aspects of each model will succeed while others fail, and that new and old players will chart their paths forward based on these outcomes. I offer a rough taxonomy of some participants in this new ecosystem, clustered by news-gathering methods and underlying financial structures.

The New Professionals. This group promises to deliver high-quality journalistic reporting through new means, operating outside the usual newspaper and television structures but adhering to traditional news-gathering methods, standards, and ethics. ProPublica, an endowment-funded newsroom, employs thirty-two investigative journalists focused on U.S. domestic issues.

ProPublica reporters are generally experienced, often celebrated professionals, and the organization's investigations have run in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and on CNN and CNBC.

The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting serves a similar function within the international news community: experienced journalists pitch stories and are awarded travel grants to support their work, with the understanding that a finished piece will be distributed through influential media outlets. While the Pulitzer Center's grant program began by sponsoring reporting that appeared in newspapers and television newsmagazines, the grants now favor multimedia reporting, and some participating reporters produce blogs and others process updates on the website while in the field covering stories. The Johns Hopkins International Reporting Project and the Alicia Patterson Foundation support reporting through similar models.

Spot.us, a start-up founded by David Cohn to provide community funding for news stories in the San Francisco Bay Area, may provide a decentralized alternative to Pulitzer funding for some journalists. The Spot.us site accepts pitches from journalists, who propose a story they would like to cover and the costs they expect to incur. Site visitors then can contribute money toward the story. If the story is fully funded, the reporter is obligated to complete and file on the site and in other media. While most pitches have sought funding for Bay Area stories, freelance journalist Lindsey Hoshaw raised \$6,000 of the \$10,000 she needed to cover a story on garbage floating in the Pacific.¹²

Pitch-based approaches like Pulitzer or ProPublica do not promise comprehensive world coverage. Seeking broader coverage, Philip Balboni, founder of

New England Cable News, introduced GlobalPost in early 2009, creating an international news bureau using the "new professional" model. To address the disappearance of foreign correspondents, GlobalPost supports sixty-five correspondents in fifty countries. The correspondents are primarily professional journalists from the United States, writing for a U.S.-centered, English-speaking audience. GlobalPost provides far less fiscal support than a newspaper bureau chief would receive; instead, GlobalPost offers a monthly salary of \$1,000 in exchange for a set of stories and "reporter diaries." The theory is that GlobalPost's support allows a reporter to maintain a presence in Kenya or Korea, but that she will freelance for multiple news organizations to earn a livable salary.

While GlobalPost is heavily committed to a traditional foreign correspondent model – and has opted not to employ local journalists in the countries it covers – it is working with a network of local bloggers to complement its professional reporting. (In this sense, GlobalPost works in part as a citizen media aggregator, a model explored below.) But the core mission of GlobalPost is to provide high-quality journalism that can be syndicated along traditional journalistic platforms, using different production methods and cost structures. The site counts the *New York Daily News*, BBC's *The World*, and *The Huffington Post* among its syndication partners. Unlike Pulitzer or ProPublica, GlobalPost is for-profit and seeks sustainability via advertising and syndication revenue.

Citizen newsrooms. Not everyone is convinced that the future of international news reporting should be in the hands of professional journalists. The past decade has seen the rise of "citizen newsrooms," where amateurs work alone or

together to report breaking news stories. The phenomenon may have started with Indymedia, whose decentralized regional groups began reporting local, national, and international news stories as an alternative to what they saw as a corrupt and unreliable corporate-controlled press. The result is a highly idiosyncratic news service whose coverage varies based on the quality of the local team, their passions, and their interests.¹³

While Indymedia was born out of anti-globalization protests and retains a strong left-wing political stance, it is harder to characterize the political leanings of the Internet's most successful collective reporting project, Wikipedia. While Wikipedia is intended as a free, user-produced encyclopedia, it has emerged as one of the leading sources for breaking news coverage. When news stories break, hundreds of contributors around the world race to contribute to the article on the topic: for example, more than a hundred authors contributed 423 edits to Wikipedia's article on the July 7, 2005, London bombings in the first two hours after the explosions. The desire to shape an article rapidly is understandable because Wikipedia is one of the Internet's most popular websites; a Wikipedia article on a news event often emerges as the most "authoritative" resource on the Internet on a given topic. The passion of Wikipedians for working on breaking news stories has had the ironic effect of crippling the growth of Wikinews, a sister project intended to serve as a global, nonpartisan newswire.

Wikipedians are not reporting from the scene of an event. Indeed, that sort of firsthand reporting – "original research," in Wikipedia parlance – is forbidden on the site. The job of Wikipedia contributors is to synthesize other reports into coherent, authoritative sto-

ries that survive the "neutral point of view" test. Because anyone can edit a story on Wikipedia, highly partisan interpretations of events are likely to be quickly modified by someone with a different political opinion. Adopting a neutral viewpoint encourages authors to agree on a noncontroversial set of facts. This sounds unwieldy, perhaps impossible, but Wikipedia's structural features, notably discussion pages, which are the designated forum for working through disputes about each article, and community norms have allowed the site to become the world's sixth most visited website.

Most citizen newsroom sites do not attempt to blur individual contributions into a neutral whole. Nowpublic, a participatory media site based in Vancouver, invites members to submit stories that include original reporting, commentary on published media reports, or opinion pieces. Members are awarded "points" based on the popularity of the content they have submitted. Demotix, based in London, offers more tangible rewards for contributors: a 50 percent share of the revenue generated from licensing photos and videos submitted by users. Both Demotix and Nowpublic combine a philosophical commitment to user-generated content with for-profit business models.

Aggregators. Realizing that hundreds of millions of people are creating content online, aggregation sites report international news by collecting content already published on citizen media platforms. Aggregation has been common in the blog community from its inception, and hundreds of topic- and geographic-focused aggregators summarize discussions in different blog communities. When stories like the Iran protests break on Twitter, it is common for one or more users to aggregate some or all

topical tweets into a single feed for easy following. The site Breaking Tweets works to make this process of aggregation more readable, accompanying representative tweets with a short summary of the event being discussed and identifying “trusted Twitter users” who editors believe are authoritative.

As Breaking Tweets illustrates, aggregators often provide more value than simply assembling all mentions of a specific topic. Global Voices attempts to make blogs, tweets, and other forms of citizen media more useful to a global audience by filtering, contextualizing, and translating these contributions. A team of professional and volunteer editors takes responsibility for identifying the topics most important to people in a given country and selecting a subset of posts that represents a range of views on those topics. They translate posts from local languages into English and write topical summaries, which quote extensively from these translations and contextualize them, referencing mainstream news stories and online encyclopedias to offer background on the issues discussed.

The process of filtering, translating, and contextualizing is a time-consuming and expensive one. Other aggregators focus on filtering and translation, assuming that interested readers will bring common context to the table. LinkTV produces *Mosaic*, a daily news program that aggregates television news from the Middle East, translating segments from Arabic, Persian, and Hebrew into English to provide an overview of perspectives aired in regional media.

Aggregators do not always need to translate to be useful. In 1995, Palestinian journalist Daoud Kuttub realized that, while many Arab governments censored stories about local politics,

neighboring countries often reported on their neighbors in great detail. The Arabic Media Internet Network (AMIN) simply posted online stories about Jordanian politics from Syrian newspapers or on Egyptian corruption from Jordanian papers, giving readers a pan-Arab view of media coverage. AllAfrica.com publishes stories from national and regional African newspapers online, unlocking content to a diaspora audience and other Africa-watchers.

Ushahidi, a two-year-old project based in Kenya, extends citizen media aggregation into the text messaging space. Created as a way to allow Kenyans to report on violence in the wake of disputed 2007 presidential elections, Ushahidi collects text messages, mobile phone photos, videos, and other reports to provide timelines and maps of ethnic violence, election rigging, or natural disasters. The reports are accessible on Ushahidi’s site and shared with media partners, including Al Jazeera, which used Ushahidi’s software to enable citizens to report on Israel’s incursions into Gaza earlier this year. The model is a form of “crowdsourcing,” a technique that is becoming increasingly popular in U.S. journalism as a way to harness the efforts of hundreds or thousands to report jointly on complex stories.

The projects introduced above vary widely in terms of their scope of coverage, their use of professionals and amateurs, and their operating methods. However, they share a set of common challenges.

Any project that embraces contributions from amateurs is subject to questions about the accuracy and verifiability of news reports. Citizen newsrooms generally do not have the resources to verify stories posted. AllVoices, a California-based citizen newsroom with lo-

cal and global focus, filters out spam but otherwise publishes all submissions, arguing that this process is “democratic” and starts conversations. Systems like NowPublic track the popularity of submitting authors, giving readers a clue as to whether an author has submitted once or has a long track record. Wikipedia’s neutral point of view policy suggests that opposing sides can argue their way toward truth. This is likely more true for popular, highly trafficked articles than for obscure ones.

Aggregators have an easier time with verification issues, as they generally assert that their job is to provide a selection of citizen reporting and opinion, not to validate those reports. However, aggregators select and amplify these voices, suggesting some degree of responsibility for filtering out irresponsible or inaccurate voices. The professional newsrooms can offer the reassurance that their authors are trained journalists following a rigorous ethics code. But the special circumstances of international news seem especially vulnerable to Jayson Blairism. The stories covered by networks like GlobalPost are often exclusives that cannot be corroborated with newswire reports or fact-checked against accounts in competing media outlets. We rely on the professionalism of the reporters and editors, not on systemic checks available on more widely covered stories.

Nearly all projects experimenting with international journalism in the new media age face serious sustainability issues. ProPublica’s newsroom is extremely expensive, made possible by an annual commitment of \$10 million in funding from Herbert and Marion Sadler. It is unclear whether the market for high-quality international news will support the cost of producing content on GlobalPost and other new professional sites

through syndication and advertising revenue. Aggregation and citizen reporting sites face lower costs, as they generally do not pay contributors. But costs for editing, filtering, community management, and translation are substantial, and recouping those costs through syndication or advertising may require revenue sharing with the original content’s authors. Virtually the only model that has had no sustainability issues is Wikipedia, which has had little trouble raising the money needed for server space and staff from its readers and contributors. That said, Wikipedia does not actually report news; it triangulates reports from mainstream media in a way that could be considered derivative or parasitic, in financial terms.

Many of the experiments in international reporting are being launched with substantial foundation support. This financial backing raises the potential for conflicts of interest. While foundations have long supported high-quality journalism through grants, we are beginning to see reporting that is even more closely linked to donors. The Kaiser Family Foundation has founded an “editorially independent” multimedia news network that exclusively covers health policy issues, the Foundation’s chief focus.

While there is no direct parallel in international news, relief and advocacy organizations are already important players in the media ecosystem. Humanitarian and UN groups often control access to stories: it is virtually impossible to report on Central African conflicts without cooperation from the Red Cross or relief agencies, for example. Advocacy organizations often have knowledge of stories that would otherwise elude an intrepid freelancer. A recent GlobalPost story focused on deforestation in Cambodia due to the harvest of saffron oil, used to make the recreational drug Ec-

stasy. All photos for the story were provided by Flora and Fauna International, an advocacy group that coordinated a raid on the harvesting operations and that, apparently, coordinated the journalist's story as well.¹⁴

Many emerging projects hope to generate a subscriber or member base willing to pay for quality coverage independent of undue corporate or foundation influence. Generating this revenue stream, or revenues from online or offline advertising, requires building an audience. This challenge may prove the steepest for this new generation of international news projects.

While the spread of the Internet has made it possible for people to access more international news more directly – whether through the projects explored here or by directly reading and watching nondomestic news sources – it is unclear if people's interests have become more cosmopolitan. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press surveys U.S. households on a weekly basis to track what news stories they are following most closely. In 2008, twelve of the fifteen stories Americans reported being most interested in were purely domestic. Two of the others were about hurricanes that

impacted the United States, and the remaining story was the Beijing Olympics, in which U.S. athletes broke numerous records.¹⁵ The ability to build interest in important international stories may be waning, as interactive media make it increasingly easy for readers to select the stories they are most interested in. And the rise of participatory media, an Internet where writing is becoming as common as reading, means the battle for attention takes place in an increasingly crowded market.

If building an audience interested in international news is a core challenge for fledgling newsrooms to overcome, the events in Iran may represent another revolutionary change. More than 480,000 users of Twitter commented on events in Iran during the first two weeks of the protests;¹⁶ more than 160,000 have used a popular tool to turn their Twitter icons green in support of protesters.¹⁷ These users were not just interested in the story – they felt they were part of the story, actively helping to amplify reports from the ground rather than passively consuming news. Reporting international news by letting users become part of the reporting and amplification process might represent a chance to bridge interest gaps that otherwise threaten to encourage parochialism.

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/business/media/29coverage.html>.

² Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (1981; New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

³ <http://sambrook.typepad.com/sacredfacts/2009/06/twittering-the-uprising.html>.

⁴ <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2009/06/17/iran-islamist-bloggers-react-to-protest-movement/>.

⁵ http://news.cnet.com/8301-17939_109-10264398-2.html.

⁶ AP and Context-Based Research Group, "A New Model for News."

⁷ Danah Boyd, "Identity Production in a Networked Culture: Why Youth Heart MySpace," (Washington, D.C.: American Association for the Advancement of Science, February 19, 2006).

- ⁸ Web Ecology Project, <http://www.webecologyproject.org/2009/06/iran-election-on-twitter/>.
- ⁹ I developed a simple tool to monitor the popularity of terms on Twitter in real time, measuring the number of total posts on the system that occur during the first and hundredth mention of a term on Twitter's search engine. More information on the tool is available at <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2009/06/25/flock-part-two-twitter-and-the-news-cycle-perfect-together/>. Using the tool in the days immediately after the Iranian protests, tweets containing the word "Iran" represented up to 3 percent of total post volume.
- ¹⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/business/media/29coverage.html>.
- ¹¹ Clay Shirky, "Newspapers and Thinking the Unthinkable" (2009), published online at <http://www.shirky.com/weblog/2009/03/newspapers-and-thinking-the-unthinkable/>.
- ¹² <http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=131&aid=167048>.
- ¹³ At this point, the most active Indymedia community is the one based in Athens, producing content in Greek; <http://www.alexandria.com/siteinfo/indymedia.org>.
- ¹⁴ <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/asia/090812/drugs-ecstasy-cambodia>.
- ¹⁵ <http://people-press.org/report/479/>.
- ¹⁶ Web Ecology Project, <http://www.webecologyproject.org/2009/06/iran-election-on-twitter/>.
- ¹⁷ <http://helpiranelection.com/>.